Russian Short Stories

How I Became an Actor

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This sad and funny story—more sad than funny—was told me by a friend of mine who had led the oddest sort of life. He had been what we Russians call “on the horse and under the horse,” but he had not, in the least, lost, under the lash of destiny, his kindness of heart and his alertness of mind. Only this particular experience produced a rather curious effect on him—he gave up going to the theatre after it and, until the present moment, nothing will drag him into one.

I shall try to transmit my friend’s story, though I am afraid that I shall be unable to reproduce the simplicity, the soft and melancholy mockery, which he put into it.

I

Well, it’s like this. Can you picture for yourself a wretched little southern country town? In the middle of it there is a sort of monstrous shallow pit where the Ukrainians of the neighbourhood, up to their waists in mud, sell cucumbers and potatoes from their carts. This is the bazaar. On one side is the cathedral, and naturally the cathedral street, on the other the town square, on the third the market stone stalls, the yellow

plaster of which has peeled off; pigeons are perching on the roof and cornices; finally, on the fourth side, stretches the main street, with a branch of some bank or other, a post office, a solicitor, and the barber Theodore from Moscow. In the outskirts of the town an infantry regiment was then billeted, and in the town itself a regiment of dragoons. In the town square stood the summer theatre. And that's all.

Still one must add that the town itself, with its Duma and secondary school, to say nothing of the square, the theatre, the paving of the main street—all this exists thanks to the liberality of a local millionaire and sugar manufacturer, Kharitonenko.

II

How I stumbled into the place is a long story, but I'll tell it briefly. In this little town I was to meet a friend, a real, true friend (God rest his soul), but he had a wife who, as is usual with the wives of our *true* friends, could not bear me. He and I each had several thousands put by through hard work: he, you see, had worked for many years as a pedagogue and as an assurance inspector at the same time, while I had been lucky at cards for a whole year. Suddenly we stumbled on a very advantageous enterprise in southern skins and decided to try our luck at it. I started at once and he was to rejoin me two or three days later. As my carelessness was an old story, our little capital was kept by him, but in a separate bundle, for my friend was a man of German carefulness.

And then began the hail of misfortunes. At the station of Kharkoff, while I was eating some cold sturgeon, sauce Provençale, I was robbed of my pocketbook. I arrive at C. (this

very little town of my story) with the small change left in my purse and a lanky, but good reddish-yellow English portmanteau. I put up at a hotel—naturally the Petersburg Hotel—and begin to send telegram after telegram. Silence of the grave. Yes, yes, literally of the grave, because at the very moment when the thief was stealing my pocketbook—what tricks fate plays!—at that very moment my friend and companion died in a cab from paralysis of the heart. All his things, including his money, were sealed and for some idiotic reason or other the wrestling with officials lasted a month and a half. Did the widow, deeply lamenting, know about my money or did she not? I can't answer that question, myself. However, she received all my telegrams, every one of them, but remained stubbornly silent—silent from petty, jealous, silly, feminine revenge. All the same, these telegrams were of great use to me later on. After removing the seals, an advocate, a complete stranger to me, who was looking after the widow's inheritance, came across them quite by accident, made the widow ashamed of herself, and, at his own risk, transferred five hundred roubles to me at the theatre. But I must add the fact that they were not mere telegrams but tragic lamentations of twenty or thirty words each.

III

I had been at the Petersburg Hotel for ten days already. My tragic lamentations had quite exhausted my purse. The hotel proprietor—a gloomy, sleepy, hairy Ukrainian, with the face of an assassin—had long ago ceased to believe in my word. I showed him certain letters and papers by which he could have,

etc., etc., but all he did was to turn his face scornfully away and snort. Finally, they served me with dinner as though I were Gogol's Khlestakov: "The proprietor has said that this is for the last time."

And then came the day when there was left in my pocket a single, orphan, greenish silver twenty kopek-piece. That morning the proprietor said insolently that he was not going to feed me or keep me any longer, but was going to report me to the police inspector. By his tone I could see that he would stop at nothing.

I left the hotel and wandered about the town. I remember entering a transport office and another place to look for work. Naturally it was refused me at the very first words. Sometimes I would, sit down on one of the green benches that lay all along the main street between the high pyramid-like poplars. My head swam; I felt sick from hunger. But not for a moment did the idea of suicide enter my mind. How many, many times in my tangled life have I been on the border of these thoughts, but then a year would pass, sometimes a month, or even simply ten minutes, and suddenly everything would be changed, everything would be going luckily again, gaily, nicely. And all through that day, as I wandered about the hot, dull town, all I kept saying to myself was: "Ye-es, my dear Pavel Andreevitch, you've got into a nice mess."

I wanted to eat. But through some sort of mysterious presentiment I clung to my twenty kopeks. Dusk was already falling when I saw on the hoardings a red poster. In any case I had nothing to do. So I mechanically approached it and read

that they were giving that day in the town gardens Goutzkov's tragedy, *Uriel Akosta*, in which so-and-so and so-and-so were to appear. Two names were printed in large black letters: An artist from the Petersburg theatres, Madame Androssova, and the well-known artist from Kharkoff, M. Lara-Larsky; the others names were in small print. Last of all, in the smallest letters, came: Petrov, Serguiev, Ivanov, Sidorov, Grigoriev, Nikolaev, and others. Stage-manager, M. Samoilenko. Managing director, M. Valerianov.

A sudden desperate inspiration seized me. I rushed across to the barber, Theodore from Moscow, and, with my last twenty kopeks, had my moustache and short pointed beard shaved off. Good Lord! What a morose, naked face glanced at me from the looking-glass! I could scarcely believe my own eyes. Instead of a man of thirty, not too good-looking, but at all events of decent appearance, there in the looking-glass in front of me, swathed up to his throat in a barber's sheet, sat an old, burned-out, inveterate, provincial comic with traces of all sorts of vice in his face and apparently not quite sober.

"You are going to work in our theatre?" asked the barber's assistant as he shook off the sheet.

"Yes," I answered proudly. "Here you are."

IV

On my way to the town gardens, I thought to myself: There's no misfortune without some good in it. I shall be taken at once for an old and experienced sparrow. In these little summer theatres, every useless man is useful. I shall be modest at the

beginning … about fifty roubles … say forty a month. The future will show. … I'll ask for an advance of about twenty roubles … no, that's too much … say, ten roubles. The first thing I'll do with it will be to send a hair-raising telegram … five times five—twenty-five and a nought—two roubles fifty kopeks, and fifteen extra charge—that's two roubles and sixty-five kopeks. On the remainder I'll get through somehow or other until Ilia arrives. If they want to test me … well, what about it? I shall recite something—why not the monologue of Pimen in *Boris Goudounov*?

And I began aloud, in a deep, pompous, strangled tone:

"And yet ano—other fa—arewell word."

A passerby jumped away from me quite frightened. I felt ashamed and cleared my throat. But I was already getting near the town gardens. A military band was playing; slim young ladies of the district, dressed in pink and sky blue, were walking about without their hats and behind them stalked, laughing aloud, their hands thrust in their jackets, their white caps rakishly on one side, the local scribes, the telegraph and excise clerks.

The doors were wide open. I went in. Someone asked me to take a ticket from the cash desk, but I said carelessly: "Where is the manager, M. Valerianov?" Two clean-shaven young men, sitting on a bench not far from the entrance, were at once pointed out to me. I approached them and halted two steps away.

They were engrossed in their conversation and took no notice

of me, so I had time to examine them. One of them, in a light Panama hat and a light flannel suit with little blue stripes, had an air of sham nobility and the haughty profile of a principal lover. He was playing negligently with his walking-stick. The other, in a greyish suit, was extraordinarily long-legged and long-armed; his legs seemed to begin at the middle of his chest and his arms probably extended below his knees. Owing to this, when sitting he had the appearance of an odd, broken line, which, however, one had better describe as a folding measure. His head was very small, his face was freckled, and he had animated dark eyes.

I coughed modestly. They both turned towards me.

“Can I see M. Valerianov?” I asked amiably.

“I am he,” the freckled one answered. “What do you want?”

“You see, I wanted …”—something tickled my throat—“I wanted to offer you my services, as … as … well, as a second comic, or … well … third clown. Also character parts.”

The principal lover rose and went off whistling and brandishing his stick.

“What previous experience have you had?” Valerianov asked.

I had only been once on the stage, when I took the part of Makarka at some amateur theatricals, but I drew convulsively on my imagination and replied:

“As a matter of fact, I haven’t taken part in any important enterprise, like yours, for example, up till now. But I have occasionally acted in small troupes in the Southwest. They came to grief as quickly as they were organised … for instance

Marinitch … Sokolovsky … and there were others too."

"Look here, you don't drink, do you?" Valerianov asked disconcertingly.

"No," I replied without hesitation. "Sometimes at dinner, or with my friends, but quite moderately."

M. Valerianov looked down at the sand, blinking with his dark eyes, thought for a few seconds, and then said:

"Well, all right, I'll take you on. Twenty-five roubles a month to begin with and then we'll see. You might be wanted even today. Go to the stage and ask for the manager's assistant, Doukhovskoi. He will introduce you to the stage-manager."

On my way I thought to myself: Why didn't he ask for my stage name? Probably he forgot. Perhaps he guessed that I had none. And in case of an emergency I then and there invented a name—not particularly sonorous, a nice simple name—Ossinine.

V

Behind the scenes I found Doukhovskoi, a nimble fellow with a thievish, tipsy face. He at once introduced me to the stage-manager, Samoilenko, who that day was acting in some kind of heroic part and for this reason sported golden armour, hessian boots, and the makeup of a young lover. However, through this disguise I could distinguish that Samoilenko was fat, that his face was quite round, with two small cunning eyes and a mouth folded in a perpetual sheep's smile. He received me haughtily, without even offering his hand. I was inclined to move away from him, when he said:

“Wait a minute; what’s your name? I didn’t make it out.”

“Vassiliev.” Doukhovshoi rushed up with the information.

“Here you are, Vassiliev. Don’t leave the place today. Doukhovski, tell the tailor to give Vassiliev his getup.”

Thus from Ossinine I became Vassiliev, and I remained Vassiliev together with Petrov, Ivanov, Nikolaev, Grigoriev, and Sidorov and others to the very end of my stage career. Inexperienced actor as I was, it was only after a week that I realised that, among all those sonorous names, mine alone covered a human being. The accursed series of names ruined me!

The tailor came, a thin, lame man, wrapped me up in a long, black calico shroud with sleeves, and tacked it on to me from head to foot. Then came the coiffeur, in whom I recognised Theodore’s assistant who had just shaved me, and we exchanged a friendly smile. He put a black wig with love-locks on my head. Doukhovskoi rushed into the dressing-room and shouted:

“I say, Vassiliev, make yourself up.”

I stuck my finger in some kind of paint, but my left-hand neighbour, a severe man with the forehead of a deep thinker, stopped me:

“Can’t you see that you’re using a private box? Here’s the box for general use.”

I saw a large case with divisions full of dirty paint all mixed together; I felt dazed. It was easy enough for Doukhovskoi to shout out: “Make yourself up,” but how was it to be done? I

manfully put a white dash along my nose and looked immediately like a clown. I traced cruel eyebrows. I made blue marks under my eyes. Then I reflected: What else could I do? I blinked and managed to insert between my eyebrows two vertical wrinkles. Now I resembled a Red Indian chief.

“Vassiliev, get ready,” someone shouted from the top of the stairs.

I went up and came to the threadbare cloth doors of the back wall. Doukhovskoi was waiting for me.

“You are to go on at once. Devil take it, what on earth do you look like? As soon as they say: ‘No, he will come back,’ go on. Go on and say—he gave some kind of proper name which I’ve forgotten—‘So-and-so is asking for an interview,’ and then exit. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“No, he will come back,” I hear, and pushing past Doukhovskoi I rush on to the stage. What the deuce was the name of that man? A second, another second of silence. The house is like a black, moving abyss. Straight in front of me, on the stage, are strange, roughly-painted faces, brightly lit up by the lamps. Everyone looks at me expectantly. Doukhovskoi whispers something at the back, but I can’t make it out. Then suddenly I fire off in a voice of solemn reproach:

“Yes, he has come back.”

Past me like a hurricane rushed Samoilenko in his golden coat of mail. Thank God! I disappear behind the curtain.

I appeared twice more in that show. In the scene when Akosta

gives the familiar thundering against the Jews and then falls. I was supposed to catch him in my arms and drag him behind the curtain. In this business I was helped by a fireman, got up in a black shroud like my own. (How is one to know? Perhaps the public thought he was Sidorov.) Uriel Akosta appeared to be the actor who had been sitting with Valerianov on the bench; he was, too, the well-known artist from Kharkoff, Lara-Larsky. We took him a little awkwardly—he was a heavy muscular man—but luckily we didn't drop him. He said to us in a whisper: "Devil take you, you louts." We dragged him with equal luck through the narrow doors, though afterwards the black wall of the ancient temple shook and swayed for a long time.

My third appearance was without words at the judgment of Akosta. A little incident, hardly worth mentioning, occurred. It was simply that when Ben-Akib came in everyone rose, but, thanks to my habit of gaping about, I continued sitting. Someone, however, pinched me painfully above the elbow and hissed out:

"Are you crazy? It's Ben-Akib. Get up!"

I rose hurriedly. On my honour I didn't know that it was Ben-Akib. I thought it was just a little old man.

At the end of the performance Samoilenko said to me:

"Vassiliev, rehearsal tomorrow at eleven."

I went back to the hotel, but on recognising my voice the proprietor banged the door in my face. I spent the night on one of the little green benches between the poplars. It was warm

sleeping there and I dreamed of glory. But the cold morning dew and the feeling of hunger woke me up rather early.

VI

Exactly at half-past ten I arrived at the theatre. There was no one there as yet. Here and there in the gardens sleepy waiters from the summer restaurant were wandering about in their white aprons. In a summerhouse of green trellis-work interwoven with wild vines they were preparing someone's breakfast or morning coffee.

I learned later on that the manager, M. Valerianov, and the elderly ex-actress Mme. Boulatova-Tchernogorskaya, a lady of about sixty-five who financed the theatre, and the manager himself, breakfasted there every morning in the fresh air.

The table was laid for two with a white glistening cloth and two little piles of sliced white and brown bread rose on a plate. …

Here comes the ticklish part of my story. For the first and last time in my life, I became a thief. Glancing round quickly, I dived into the arbour and seized several slices of bread in my open hand; it was so soft, so exquisite. But as soon as I was outside again I ran up against the waiter. I don't know where he came from; probably I hadn't noticed him behind the arbour. He was carrying a cruet-stand with mustard, pepper, and vinegar. He looked hard at me, then at the bread in my hand, and said quietly:

"What does this mean?"

A sort of burning, scornful pride welled up in me. Looking right into the pupils of his eyes, I answered as quietly:

“It means … that since four o’clock the day before yesterday I have had positively nothing to eat.”

He spun suddenly round, without uttering a word, and ran off somewhere. I hid the bread in my pocket and waited. I had a feeling at once of dread and joy. That’s excellent, I was thinking. Now the proprietor will rush up, the waiters will gather round, they will whistle for the police … there will be a row, insults, a fight. Oh how magnificently I shall smash these very plates and cruets over their heads. I’ll bite them till I draw blood.

But then, what do I see? My waiter is running back to me by himself. He was a little out of breath. He came up to me sideways, without looking at me. I, too, averted my eyes. And then suddenly, from under his apron, he pushed into my hand a piece of yesterday’s cold meat, carefully salted, and whispered entreatingly:

“Please, do eat, I beg of you.”

I took the meat roughly from him, went with it behind the scenes, chose a corner—a rather dark one—and then, sitting among the old stage properties, I tore the meat greedily with my teeth and shed happy tears.

Later on I saw that man often, almost every day. His name was Serguei. When there were no customers, he used to look at me from a distance kindly with faithful, hospitable eyes. But I had no wish to spoil, either for myself or for him, that first sympathetic impression, though I confess I was sometimes as hungry as a wolf in the winter.

He was a small, rather fat, rather bald man, with black cockroach-like moustaches and kind eyes, shaped like narrow radiant semicircles. He was always in a hurry and gave the impression of hopping along. When I received my money at last and my theatrical slavery remained only a dream, and all these rotten people were lapping up my champagne and flattering me, how I did miss you, you dear, funny, pathetic Serguei! Of course I should never have dared to offer him money—can one possibly estimate in money such kindness and human affection? I merely wanted to give him some little present before going away… a little trifle… or else something for his wife or his kids—he had a whole swarm of them, and in the morning sometimes they used to run up to him, agitated and clamorous like young sparrows.

But a week before my marvellous transformation Serguei was dismissed, and I know the reason. Captain von Bradke had been served a beefsteak not to his taste. He bawled out:

“What’s this you’re giving me, you rascal? Don’t you know that I like it red?”

Serguei ventured to remark that it was not his fault, but the cook’s, and that he would go and change it at once. He even added timidly:

“Excuse me, Mister.”

This apology maddened the officer. He struck Serguei with his beefsteak on the cheek, and turning purple, he yelled out:

“Wha-at! I am a mister to you, am I? I am not a mister to you, I am staff captain of cavalry to my emperor! Where’s the

proprietor? Call the proprietor. Ivan Lukianytch, I want this idiot cleaned out of here today. I don't want a trace of him here. If there is, I'll never set foot in your pothouse again."

The staff captain of cavalry, von Bradke, was a man of big sprees and for this reason Serguei was dismissed that very day. The proprietor spent the whole evening in calming the officer. I myself, when I came out between the acts for a breath of fresh air in the gardens, heard for a long time the enraged, bellowing voice issuing from the arbour.

"What a scoundrel the fellow is! Mister! If it hadn't been for the ladies I would have shown him the meaning of mister!"

VII

In the meantime the actors had gradually drifted in and at half-past twelve the rehearsal, due at eleven, began. They were giving a play entitled *The New World*, a kind of insipid sideshow transformation of Senkevicz's novel *Quo Vadis*. Doukhovskoi gave me a typewritten sheet of paper containing my lines. I had the part of the Centurion in the division of Mark the Magnificent. They were pompous, loud lines, as, for example: "Thy orders, O Mark the Magnificent, have been punctually obeyed," or "She will wait for thee at the pedestal of the statue of Pompeii, Mark the Magnificent." I liked the part, and I was already preparing a manly voice of a sort of old swashbuckler, stern and faithful.

But as the rehearsal proceeded, an odd thing happened to me; to my surprise I began to get divided and multiplied. For instance, at the end of the Matron Veronica's speech,

Samoilenko, who followed the play with the full text in front of him, claps his hands and shouts:

“A slave comes in.”

No one comes in.

“But who is the slave? Doukhovskoi, see who is the slave.”

Doukhovskoi rummages hastily through some sheets of paper. “There is no slave!”

“Cut him out, what about it!” lazily advises Boev, the argumentative person with a forehead of a thinker, into whose paintbox I had stuck my fingers the day before.

But Mark the Magnificent (Lara-Larsky) suddenly takes offence at this:

“No, that won’t do, please. I have an effective entrance here … I don’t play this scene without a slave.”

Samoilenko’s eyes gallop round the stage and halt at me.

“There you are, I mean … I mean … Vassiliev, are you on in this act?”

I consult my copybook.

“Yes, at the very end.”

“Then here’s another part for you—Veronica’s slave. Read it from the book.” He claps his hands. “A little less noise, gentlemen, please. Enter the slave. … ‘Noble dame,’ … Speak up, speak up, one couldn’t hear you from the first row.”

A few minutes later they couldn’t find a slave for the divine Marcia (in Senkevicz’s text she is Ligia), and this part is

dumped on to me. Then some kind of house steward is missing. Me again! In this way, by the end of the rehearsal, I had, without counting the Centurion, five additional parts.

It wouldn't go all at the beginning. I come out and pronounce my first words:

"Mark the Magnificent …"

Then Samoilenko stretches his legs wide apart, bends forward, and puts his hands to his ears:

"Wha-at! What's that you're mumbling? I understand nothing."

"O Mark the Magnificent …"

"What's that? I can hear nothing … Louder!" He comes quite close to me. "This is the way to do it," and in a guttural goat's voice he shouts out loud enough to be heard all over the gardens:

"'O Mark the Magnificent, thy order' … That's how it's got to be done. Remember, young man, the immortal apothegm of one of the greatest of our Russian artists: 'On the stage one doesn't speak, one declaims; one doesn't walk, one struts.'" He looked round with a self-satisfied air. "Repeat."

I repeated, but it was still worse. Then, one after the other, they began to coach me, and positively the whole lot of them instructed me to the very end of the rehearsal: Lara-Larsky with a careless and disgusted manner; the old, swollen, noble father Gontcharov, whose flabby red-veined cheeks were hanging down below his chin; the argumentative Boev; the idiot Akimenko, who was made up as a sort of Ivan the Simpleton. I was getting like a worried, steaming horse, around

whom a street crowd of advisers had gathered, or a new boy who had fallen from his safe family nest into a circle of cunning, experienced, and merciless schoolboys.

At this rehearsal I made a petty, but persistent, enemy who afterwards poisoned every day of my existence. It happened like this:

I was repeating endlessly: “O Mark the Magnificent,” when suddenly Samoilenko rushed up to me.

“Allow me, allow me, my friend; allow me, allow me. Not like that, not like that. Think whom you’re addressing—Mark the Magnificent himself. Well, you haven’t got the faintest notion how subordinates in ancient Rome addressed their supreme chief. Watch me; here’s the gesture.”

He shot his right leg forward half a pace, bent his trunk at a right angle, and hung down his right arm, after manipulating his palm into the shape of a little boat.

“Do you see what the gesture is? Do you understand? Repeat.”

I repeated, but with me the gesture proved so stupid and ugly that I decided on a timid objection:

“I beg your pardon, but it seems to me that military training … it generally avoids somehow the bent position … and, apart from that, there’s a stage direction … he comes out in his armour … and you will admit that in armour …”

“Kindly be quiet!” Samoilenko shouted angrily; he had become purple. “If the manager orders you to stand on one foot with your tongue out, you must obey in absolute silence. Kindly repeat.”

I repeated and the effect was still more grotesque. But at this point Lara-Larsky came to my rescue.

“Leave it alone, Boris,” he said weariedly to Samoilenko. “Can’t you see that he isn’t up to it? And apart from this, as you know yourself, history gives us no direct indications. The question … hum … is debatable.”

Samoilenko left me in peace about his classical gesture. But after that he never missed a chance of knifing me, stinging me, and generally insulting me. He followed all my blunders jealously. He hated me so much that I’m sure he dreamed of me every night. For my part, even now, after ten years, this very day, as soon as I remember this man, rage surges up in me and chokes my throat. It is true that before my departure … however, I’ll tell about that later on, otherwise it will spoil the harmony of the story.

Towards the very end of the rehearsal, there suddenly appeared on the stage a tall, thin, long-nosed man, with a bowler hat and a moustache. He staggered slightly, knocking against the wings, and his eyes were exactly like a pair of pewter buttons. Everyone looked at him with disgust, but no one passed any remark.

“Who is he?” I asked Doukhovskoi in a whisper.

“Eh! A drunkard,” he answered casually. “Nelioubov-Olguine, our scene-painter. He’s a clever fellow, acts sometimes when he’s sober, but he’s a perfectly hopeless drunkard. Still, there’s no one to take his place; he’s cheap and paints scenes very quickly.”

VIII

The rehearsal ended. People were going away. The actors were joking, playing on words: Mercia-Commercia. Lara-Larsky was telling Boev meaningly to come “there.” I caught up with Valerianov in one of the alleys and, scarcely able to keep pace with his long strides, I said:

“Victor Victorovitch … I want very much to ask you for some money … if only a little.”

He stopped and seemed quite stupefied.

“What? What money? Why money? For whom?”

I began to explain my position to him, but, without hearing me to the end, he turned his back on me and went on. Then suddenly he stopped and called out:

“I say, you there … what’s your name? … Vassiliev. You’d better go to that man, your proprietor, and tell him to come and enquire for me here. I shall remain at the box-office for another half-hour. I’ll have a word with him.”

I didn’t go to the hotel, I flew to it. The Ukrainian listened with gloomy distrust; however, he put on his brown jacket and crawled slowly to the theatre. I waited for him. A quarter of an hour later he returned. His face was like a stormy cloud, and a bundle of theatre passes was sticking out of his right hand. He shoved them right under my nose and said in a muffled bass:

“There you are! I thought he’d give me coins and he gives me bits of paper. What good are they to me?”

I stood confused. However, the bits of paper had a certain

utility. After long exhortations, the proprietor consented to share my belongings: he kept as a deposit my beautiful new English leather portmanteau and I took my underclothes, my passport and, what was more precious to me than anything else, my travelling notebooks. By way of goodbye, the Ukrainian asked me:

“What—are you, too, going to play the fool over there?”

“Yes, I, too,” I said with dignity.

“Ho, ho, you be careful. As soon as I set eyes on you on the stage, I’ll shout out: ‘What about my twenty roubles?’ ”

For the next three days, I didn’t venture to trouble Valerianov, and slept on the little green bench with my small parcel of underclothes under my head as a pillow. Two nights, thank God, were warm; I even felt, as I lay on the bench, a dry heat mounting up from the pavement that had been well warmed during the day. But on the third night there was a fine, continuous rain and I took shelter on a doorstep and was unable to sleep till the morning. The town gardens were open at eight. I stole in behind the scenes, lay down on an old curtain, and slept soundly for two hours. Of course I came under Samoilenko’s eyes and he, at great length and stingingly, informed me that a theatre was the temple of art and not at all a dormitory or a boudoir or a dosshouse. Then I decided to overtake the manager again in the alley and ask him for some money, however little, as I had nowhere to sleep.

“I beg your pardon,” he said waving his arms apart, “what has it got to do with me? You’re not a child, are you? And in any

case I'm not your nurse."

I kept silent. His half-closed eyes wandered over the bright, sunny sand of the footpath and then he said thoughtfully:

"Suppose … look here … suppose you spend the nights in the theatre. I suggested that to the night watch, but the fool was afraid."

I thanked him.

"But only on one condition. No smoking in the theatre. If you want to smoke, go out into the gardens."

After that I was guaranteed a sleeping place under a roof. Sometimes, in the daytime, I would go some three miles along the river and wash my clothes in a modest little corner and dry them on the branches of the willows. My linen was of great help to me. From time to time I would go to the bazaar and sell there a shirt or something. On the twenty or thirty kopecks acquired in this way I would feed myself for two whole days. Things were taking visibly a favourable turn for me. Once I even managed, in a happy moment, to get a rouble out of Valerianov and immediately I dispatched a telegram to Ilia:

"Dying from hunger. Wire money C. Theatre.—Leontovitch."

IX

The second rehearsal was the full-dress one. In this, by the way, I was stuck for two new roles: that of an ancient Christian and that of Tigellius. I accepted them without a murmur.

Our tragedian, Timofeev-Soumskoi, took part in this. He was a broad-shouldered man, about five feet high, no longer young,

with red curly hair, the whites of his eyes sticking out, and with a pockmarked face—a regular butcher, or rather an executioner. He had an enormous voice and he acted in an old-fashioned, hectoring manner.

He didn't know his lines at all (he was taking the part of Nero), and he had difficulty even in reading it from his copybook with the aid of his powerful spectacles. When people said to him: "You ought to study your part just a little, Fedot Pamfylytch," he would reply in a low octavo:

"Oh, let it go. It'll do. I'll stand near the prompter. It isn't the first time. In any case the public understands nothing. The public's a fool."

He was constantly having trouble with my name. He simply couldn't pronounce "Tigellius," but called me either Tigelini or Tinegil. Every time that he was corrected, he would bark out:

"Let it go. Rot. I'm not going to fill my brain with rubbish."

If he had a difficult phrase or several foreign words coming together, he would simply cross it out in pencil in his book and declare:

"I'm cutting that."

However, everyone used to cut. From the soup of our play there remained only the thickness. Out of the long role of Tigellius there survived in the end only one reply.

Nero asks:

"Tigellius, in what state are the lions?"

And I answer on my knees:

“Divine Caesar, Rome has never seen such wild beasts. They are ravenous and ferocious.”

That was all.

The opening night arrived. The theatre was crammed. Outside, round the barriers, the crowd of the non-paying public was thick and black. I was nervous.

My God, how horribly they all acted! Just as if they had all acquiesced in Timofeev’s verdict, “The public’s a fool.” Every word, every gesture, recalled something old-fashioned, which has become stale through the repetition of generations. These servants of art seemed to me to have at their disposal altogether about two dozen intonations, learned by heart, and about three dozen gestures, also learned by heart, as, for example, the one that Samoilenko fruitlessly tried to teach me. And I was wondering how it was, through what moral fall had these people become so lost to all shame of their faces, of their bodies, of their movements!

Timofeev-Soumskoi was magnificent. Leaning over the right side of the throne, during which process his extended left leg protruded right into the middle of the stage, his fool’s crown all awry, he was fixing the mobile whites of his eyes on the prompter’s box and yelling in such a way that the little urchins behind the barriers shrieked with delight. Naturally he didn’t remember my name. He simply bawled at me like a Russian merchant at the Russian baths:

“Teliantin! Bring along my lions and tigers. Qui-ick!”

I submissively swallowed my reply and went. Of course, the

worst of the lot was Mark the Magnificent, Lara-Larsky, because he was more shameless, careless, trivial, and self-confident than the others. Instead of pathos he gave shrieks, instead of tenderness, sickliness. Through the authoritative speeches of a Roman patrician there peeped out the chief of a Russian fire-brigade. But then Adrossova was really beautiful. Everything about her was charming: her inspired face, delightful arms, her elastic, musical voice, even her long wavy hair which, in the last scene, she let loose over her shoulders. She acted just as simply, naturally, and beautifully as a bird sings.

With real artistic delight, sometimes even with tears, I followed her through the small holes in the cloth background of the stage. But I did not foresee that a few minutes later she would touch me, not artistically but in a quite different manner.

In this play I was so multi-figured that really the management might have added, in their advertisement list, to the names of Petrov, Sidorov, Grigoriev, Ivanov and Vassiliev, the names of Dmitriev and Alexandrov. In the first act, I appeared first of all as an old man with a white robe and with a hood on my head; then I ran behind the scenes, threw off my things and came on again as a centurion with armour and a helmet, my feet naked; then I disappeared again and crawled out as the ancient Christian. In the second act, I was a centurion and a slave. In the third act, two new slaves. In the fourth, a centurion and someone else's two new slaves. I was also a steward and a new slave. Then I was Tigellius and, finally, a voiceless knight who with an imperative gesture indicates to Marcia and Mark the

way to the arena where they are going to be eaten by lions.

Even the simpleton, Akimenko, tapped me on the shoulder and said amiably:

“Devil take it, you are a quick-change artist and no mistake!”

But I earned this praise at too great cost. I could scarcely stand on my feet.

The performance was over. The caretaker was putting out the lights. I was walking about the stage waiting for the last actors to remove their makeup so that I might be able to lie down on my old threadbare sofa. I was also thinking of that morsel of fried liver which was hanging in my little corner between the property room and the general dressing-room. (For since the rats robbed me of a piece of bacon I used to hang all eatables on a string.) Suddenly I heard a voice behind me:

“Good night, Vassiliev.”

I turned round. Androssova was standing with her hand stretched out; her delightful face looked tired.

I must say that in the whole troupe she alone, not counting the insignificant ones, Doukhovskoi and Nelioubov-Olguine, used to shake hands with me (the others despised me). And even to this day I can recall the open, kindly, genuine way in which she shook hands like a woman and a comrade at the same time.

I took her hand. She looked at me attentively and said:

“Listen. Aren’t you ill? You look bad.” And she added in a lower tone: “Perhaps you’re in need of money?… eh?… may I lend it?…”

“Oh no, no, thank you,” I interrupted her with feeling. And suddenly, yielding to the rush of emotion with which her acting had thrilled me, I exclaimed with fire:

“How beautiful you were tonight!”

Probably the compliment, by its sincerity, was a little unusual. She blushed with pleasure, lowered her eves and said laughingly:

“I’m so glad that I gave you pleasure.”

I kissed her hand respectfully. But at that instant a woman’s voice shouted:

“Androssova! Where are you? Come along, we’re waiting for you for supper.”

“Good night, Vassiliev,” she said simply and kindly. Then she shook her head, and just as she was leaving, murmured scarcely audibly: “Ah, you poor one, you poor one …”

No, I didn’t feel at all poor at that moment. But it seemed to me that if, in saying goodbye, she had brushed my forehead with her lips, I should have died from happiness.

X

I wasn’t long in taking the measure of the whole troupe. I confess that even before my involuntary actor’s career I never had a high opinion of the provincial stage. But, thanks to Ostrovsky, my idea of acting folk was that, though rough in externals, they were kindly and large in their hearts, happy-go-lucky people, but devoted to art in their way and full of esprit de corps. But now I perceived that the stage was held quite

simply by a band of shameless men and women.

They were all heartless, treacherous, and envious of each other, without the slightest respect for beauty and creative power—in a word, base, insensitive souls. And, on the top of it all, they were people of dumbfounding ignorance and deep indifference, hysterical hypocrites, cold liars, with crocodile tears and theatrical sobs, stubbornly stunted slaves—always ready to crawl before their superiors and patrons. It was not without point that Chekhov said once: “There is only one person more hysterical than the actor—it is the constable. See how they both stand in front of a buffet on a bank holiday, make speeches and weep.”

But theatrical traditions were kept up immovably among us. Someone or other, before going on the stage, had the habit of making the sign of the cross. The story of this spread. And each of our principals, before his entrance, would not fail to go through the same performance, looking round sideways while he was doing it to see if anyone was watching him or not. And if they are watching he imagines them to be saying to themselves: “How superstitious he is! What an original creature!”

One of these prostitutes of art, with a goat’s voice and fat thighs, once beat the tailor and, on another occasion, the barber. This also became an established tradition. I have often watched Lara-Larsky throwing himself about the stage with bloodshot eyes, foaming at the mouth, and shouting hoarsely:

“Give me this tailor. I will kill him, this tailor.”

And then, after having struck the tailor and, deep down in his soul, expecting and fearing a return blow, he would stretch his hands out backwards and roar:

“Hold me, hold me, or I shall become in reality a murderer!”

But then how profoundly they would discuss “the holy art” and the theatre! I remember one clear, green July day. Our rehearsal had not commenced. It was rather dark and cool on the stage. Of the principals, Lara-Larsky and his theatrical wife, Medvedieva, had arrived before the others. A few girls and schoolboys were sitting in the pit. Lara-Larsky walked backwards and forwards across the stage. He seemed preoccupied. Apparently he was thinking out some profound new type. Suddenly his wife addressed him:

“Sasha, please whistle that motive that we heard in *Paillasse* yesterday.”

He stopped short, looked her up and down from head to foot, and said in the actor’s velvety baritone, glancing sideways at the pit:

“Whistle? On the stage? Ha-ha-ha!” (He laughed the actor’s bitter laugh.) “And it’s you who tell me to do this? But don’t you know that the stage is a temple, an altar on which we lay all our best thoughts and hopes? And then suddenly to whistle! Ha-ha-ha.”

All the same, to this very altar, in the ladies’ dressing-rooms, the local cavalry officers and the rich, idle, landed proprietors used to come exactly as they would come to rooms in a *maison de tolérance*. Of course we weren’t touchy about this sort of

thing. How often have I seen something like this: Inside the vineyard arbour a light would be burning, a woman's laugh could be heard, the click of spurs, the tinkling of champagne glasses, while the theatrical husband, like a sentry on patrol, would be walking backwards and forwards on the path near the entrance, waiting in the darkness and wondering if he would or would not be invited. And the waiter, bringing in the fish au gratin on a highly-lifted tray, would jog against him with his elbow and say dryly:

"Step aside, sir."

And when he is invited, he will fuss and drink vodka and beer and vinegar while he tells dirty anecdotes about Jewish life.

But all the same they used to talk hotly and proudly about art. Timofeev-Soumskoi, more than once, lectured us on the lost "classic gesture of exit."

"The classic gesture is lost," he would say gloomily. "This is how an actor would leave the stage in the past. Like this." Timofeev would stretch himself out at full length and raise his right hand with his fist clenched except for the index finger, which would stick out like a hook. "Do you see?" And with slow, enormous strides he would move to the door. "That is what was called 'the classical gesture of exit.' And now? One just puts one's hands in one's trouser-pockets and off one goes home. That's about it now, my friends."

Sometimes they took a fancy for innovations on their own account. Lara-Larsky would interpret his role of Gogol's Khlestakov like this:

“No, allow me. I interpret this scene with the town bailiff in this way. The town bailiff says that the room is rather dark. And I answer, ‘Yes, if you want to read something, *for example, Maxim Gorky*, it’s impossible. It is da-ark, da-arkish.’ And that always gets a round.”

It was good to listen sometimes to the old ones, when they were a little drunk; for instance, Timofeev-Soumskoi talking with Gontcharov.

“Yes, old pal, we don’t get the same kind of actor nowadays. No, no, it isn’t the same.”

“It’s a fact, my boy, it isn’t the same. Do you remember Tcharsky and Lioubovsky? … Eh?”

“The old traditions are lost.”

“It’s the fault of Petersburg, It isn’t the same. They don’t respect any longer the sacredness of art. All the same, you and I, we were priests in the temple, but these others … Eh? … let’s drink, old man.”

“And do you remember Ivan Kozlovsky?”

“Ah, let it alone, don’t revive an old sore. Let’s drink. What can they do, the people of today?”

“Yes, what can they do?”

“Wha-at can they do?”

And there, in the midst of this mixture of triviality, stupidity, swindling, mannerisms, bragging, ignorance, and depravity, Androssova alone truthfully served art. Androssova—clean, charming, beautiful, and talented. Now that I am older, I

understand that she was no more conscious of this filth than the white, beautiful corolla of a flower is conscious that its roots are being fed by the slime of a marsh.

XI

The plays were produced at express speed. Short dramas and comedies would be given one rehearsal. *The Death of Ivan the Terrible* and *The New World* would be given two. *Ismael*, the composition of M. Boukharine, required three rehearsals, thanks only to the fact that about forty supers from the local commands, the garrison, the army transport, and the fire brigade took part in it.

I remember particularly well the performance of The *Death of Ivan the Terrible*, because of a stupid and amusing incident. Timofeev-Soumskoi was taking the part of Ivan. In his long brocade robe and his pointed dogskin hat he looked like a moving obelisk. In order to give the terrible tzar a little more ferocity, he kept protruding his lower jaw and dropping his thick underlip, rolling his eyes about, and bellowing as he had never bellowed before. Of course he knew nothing about his part and read it in such verse that even the actors, who were long inured to the fact that the public is a fool and understands nothing, were startled. But he particularly distinguished himself in the scene where Ivan, in an attack of repentance, kneels and confesses before the boyards: “My mind has clouded,” etc.

And when he came to the words, “like a reeking cur…” it goes without saying that his eyes were all the time on the prompter’s box. In the hearing of the whole house he said, “like—” and

then stopped.

“Like a reeking cur,” whispered the prompter.

“Like,” roared Timofeev.

“Like a cur …”

“Like …”

“Like a reeking cur …”

In the end he succeeded in getting through the text, but he showed not the slightest confusion or shame. But as for me—I was standing near the throne at the time—I was seized with an irresistible attack of laughter.

It always happens like this; when you know that you *must not* laugh, it will be exactly then that you will be mastered by this convulsive, wretched laughing. I realised quickly that the best thing to do was to hide at the back of the throne and there laugh it out to my heart’s content. I turned round and walked in a solemn, boyard-like manner, hardly able to keep my face straight. I got round the throne and there … I saw two of the actresses pressing against the back of it, shaken and choking with suppressed laughter. This was more than I could endure. I ran behind the scenes, fell on the stage sofa—*my* sofa—and began to roll on it. … Samoilenko, who always jealously followed me, docked me five roubles for that.

On the whole, this performance was rich in incidents. I forgot to say that we had an actor named Romanov, a tall, very handsome, representative young fellow, for the loud and majestic secondary parts. But, unfortunately, he was so extremely shortsighted that he had to wear glasses of a quite

special kind. Without his pince-nez he would be everlastingly knocking against something on the stage, upsetting the columns, the vases, and the armchairs, getting entangled in the carpets and falling down. He was already famous for the fact that, in another town and in another strolling company, when acting the knight in *La Princesse Lointaine*, he fell down and rolled in his tin armour, rattling like an enormous samovar, into the footlights. In The Death of *Ivan the Terrible* Romanov surpassed himself. He broke into the house of Shuisky, where the plotters had gathered, with such impetuosity that he upset a long bench on which the boyards were all sitting.

These boyards were delightful. They were all recruited from the young Karaim Jews who were employed at the local tobacco factory. I ushered them on to the stage. I am not tall, but the tallest of them was only up to my shoulder. One half of these illustrious boyards was dressed in Caucasian costumes with kaftans, and the other half in long jackets which had been hired from a local choir. On their youthful faces were fastened black beards, their black eyes shone, their mouths were enthusiastically open, their movements awkward and shy. The audience neighed heartily at our solemn entrance.

Owing to the fact that we produced a fresh play every day, our theatre was rather well patronised. The officers and the landed proprietors came for the actresses. Apart from them, a box ticket was sent every day to Kharitonenko. He himself came seldom, not more than twice during the whole season, but on each occasion he sent a hundred roubles. On the whole, the theatre wasn’t doing so badly. And if the young actors received

no salary, it was thanks to the delicate calculations of Valerianov. The manager was like the coachman who used to dangle a wisp of hay in front of his hungry jade's muzzle to make him run faster.

XII

On one occasion—I don't remember why—there was no performance. The weather was bad. At ten o'clock that night I was already on my sofa, listening in the dark to the drumming of the rain on the wooden roof.

Suddenly I heard a rustling somewhere behind the scenes, then steps, then the crash of falling chairs. I lit a candle-end and went out to investigate the sounds, only to see the drunken Nelioubov-Olguine who was helplessly groping between the scenery and the wall of the theatre. On catching sight of me, he was not alarmed, but expressed a tranquil surprise.

"Wh—at the d—d—evil are you doing here?"

I explained to him in a few words. He thrust his hands into his pockets, nodded with his long nose, and swayed from his heels to the tips of his toes for some time. Then he suddenly lost his balance, but recovered it, moved a few steps forward and said:

"And why not come with me?"

"We scarcely know each other. …"

"Rubbish! Come along."

He took my arm and we went off together. From that hour to the very end of my career as an actor I shared with him his dark, tiny room which he rented from the ex-police inspector of

C——. This notorious drunkard, the object of the whole troupe's hypocritical scorn, showed himself to be a kind, quiet man, a true comrade, possessed of much inner delicacy of feeling. But he had in his heart a kind of sickly, incurable wound—the work of a woman. I could never get at the reality of his romance. When drunk, he would often drag out from his travelling basket the portrait of a woman, not very beautiful, but not ugly either, slightly squint-eyed, with a turned-up, provoking little nose. She looked to me a provincial. He would either kiss this photograph or fling it on the floor, press it to his heart or spit on it, place it against the icons in the corner or pour candle-grease over it. I could never make out which of them had thrown the other over, or who the children were of whom he spoke, his, hers, or someone else's.

Neither he nor I had any money. Long ago he had obtained from Valerianov a rather large sum to send *her*, and now he was in a condition of bond-service which simple honour prevented him from evading. Occasionally he would earn a few kopecks from the local signboard artist. But his source of increment was a great secret from the rest of the troupe; how would Lara-Larsky have tolerated such an insult to art?

Our landlord, the retired police inspector, a fat, red-cheeked man, with a moustache and a double chin, was a very benevolent person. Every morning and evening, after they had finished tea in his house, a newly-filled samovar, a teapot with the tea previously used, and as much black bread as we wished, was sent to us. We used to be quite satisfied.

The retired police inspector would take a nap after dinner and

then come out in his dressing-gown with his pipe and sit on the steps. Before going to the theatre, we would sit near him. The conversation was invariably the same: his misfortunes in the service, the injustice of his superiors, and the base intrigues of his enemies. He always asked us for advice as to how he was to write a letter to the principal newspapers, so that his innocence might triumph and the governor, and the vice-governor, with the present district inspector, and that scoundrel the inspector of the second section, who was the main cause of all his misfortunes, might be hounded from their posts. We would make different suggestions, but he would only sigh, frown, shake his head, and repeat:

"Eh, not that… not that, not that. There, if I could find a man with a pen; it's a pen that I must find. I wouldn't spare any money."

And he, the rascal, had money. Once on entering his room I found him sorting his securities. He was slightly contused, rose from his chair, and hid the papers behind him with the help of his open dressing-gown. I am quite convinced that during his period of service there were many things to his credit: acceptance of bribes, extortions, the misuse of power, and other deeds of the sort.

At night, after the performance, Nelioubov and I would often wander about the gardens. In the quiet, lit-up gardens there were everywhere little white tables on which the candles burned unwaveringly in their glass shades. Men and women, somehow or other in a festive atmosphere, smiled and leaned towards each other significantly and coquettishly. The sand

rustled under the light steps of women.

“What about landing a little fish,” Nelioubov would sometimes say in his hoarse bass voice, looking sideways at me slyly.

That sort of thing annoyed me at first. I always hated this eager, noble readiness of garden actors to paste themselves on to the dinners and lunches of strangers, these kind, moist, hungry dog’s eyes, these baritones at table with their unnaturally detached manners, their universal knowledge of gastronomy, their forced attentiveness, their habitual authoritative familiarity with the waiters. But afterwards, when I got to know Nelioubov better, I understood that he was only joking. This odd fellow was proud and extremely touchy in his way.

But a funny and slightly discreditable incident happened which caught my friend and me in a culinary net. It happened like this:

We were the last to leave the dressing-room after the performance when suddenly, from somewhere behind the scenes, there jumped out on to the stage a certain Altshiller, a local Rothschild, a Jew, still young but already fat, with very airy manners—a rosy-cheeked man, of the sensual type, covered with rings and chains and trinkets. He threw himself at us.

“Good gracious! I’ve been running about for the last half hour. I’m dead beat. Tell me, for Heaven’s sake, if you’ve seen Volkova and Bogoutcharskaia?”

As a matter of fact, immediately after the performance, we had seen these actresses drive off with some dragoon officers, and

we amiably imparted the news to Altshiller, He caught his head between his hands and threw himself about the stage:

“But this is shameful! I’ve ordered the supper. No, this is really the limit! To give one’s word, to promise and … What do you call that, gentlemen, I ask you?”

We were silent.

He made a few more contortions on the stage, then stopped, hesitated, scratched his head nervously, smacked his lips thoughtfully, and said suddenly, in a decided manner:

“Gentlemen, may I ask you to have supper with me?”

We refused.

But he would take no refusal. He stuck to us like glue. He threw himself first at Nelioubov and then at me, shook our hands, looked appealingly into our eyes, and assured us with warmth that he was devoted to art. Nelioubov was the first to give way.

“Oh, the devil! Let’s go, what about it!”

Maecenas led us to the main platform and began bustling about. He chose the most conspicuous place, got us seated, and kept jumping up, running after the waiters, waving his arms and, after drinking a glass of kümmel, pretended to be a desperate debauchee. His bowler hat was all on one side, to give him an air of wickedness.

“Try a little cucumber! How does one put it in Russian? Isn’t it that without a little cucumber no festivity is possible? Try a little vodka. Do eat. Go ahead, I beg of you. And perhaps you’d

like some *Bœuf à la Stroganof*? It's excellent at this place. Here, waiter!"

From a large piece of hot roast beef I became drunk, as though from wine. My eyes were closing. The verandah with its lights, the blue tobacco smoke, and the fantastic gallop of talk, kept flowing past me, and I could hear as in a dream:

"Please eat a little more, gentlemen. … Don't be on ceremony. Really I don't know what to do with myself, I am so devoted to art."

XIII

But the dénouement was near at hand. My fare of black bread and tea was undermining my health. I became irritable, and often, in order to keep myself in hand, I would run away from the rehearsal to some remote corner in the gardens. Besides, I had long ago exhausted my stock of underclothes.

Samoilenko continued to torment me. You know how it is sometimes at a boarding-school, when a master, for no reason at all, suddenly gets his knife into some poor little wretch of a pupil. He will hate him for the pallor of his face, because his ears stick out, because he shrugs his shoulders unpleasantly, and this hate will last for years. This is exactly how Samoilenko behaved towards me. He had already managed to fine me fifteen roubles altogether, and during rehearsals he would speak to me as though he were the head of a prison addressing a convict. Sometimes, as I listened to his insolent remarks, I would lower my eyelids and would then see fiery circles in front of my eyes. As for Valerianov, he had stopped speaking to

me at all, and when we met he would bolt like an ostrich. I had been with him a month and a half already and had received exactly one rouble.

One morning I woke up with a headache, with a metallic taste in my mouth, and in my soul a black, heavy, unreasoned anger. In this frame of mind I went to the rehearsal.

I don't remember what we were acting, but I remember well that there was a thick rolled up copybook in my hand. I knew my part, as usual, perfectly. It contained the words: "I have deserved this."

And when the play got to this passage I said:

"I have deserved this."

But Samoilenko ran up to me and bawled out:

"Who speaks Russian like this? Whoever speaks like this? 'I have deserved this!' One says: 'I have deserved for this.' Mediocrity!"

Growing white I stretched the copybook out to him with these words:

"Kindly look at the text."

But he shouted out in a guttural voice:

"To hell with your text! I myself am your text. If you don't want to keep your job here, you may go to the devil."

I quickly raised my eyes to his. Suddenly he understood everything, became as pale as I was, and moved back quickly two steps. But it was already too late. With the heavy rolled copybook I struck him heavily and loudly on the left cheek and

on the right, then again on the left, and then on the right again, and again, and again. He made no resistance, did not even duck, did not even try to run away, but, at each blow, only switched his head to left and right, like a clown who plays at being surprised. Finally I flung the copybook in his face and left the stage for the gardens. Nobody stopped me.

And then the miracle happened. The first person that I saw in the gardens was a little messenger-boy from the local branch of the Volga-Kama bank. He was asking for Leontovitch and handed me a notification of five hundred roubles, that were waiting for me at the bank.

An hour later Nelioubov and I were already in the gardens ordering a gigantic lunch, and two hours later the whole troop was drinking my health in champagne and congratulating me. On my honour, it wasn't I but Nelioubov who had spread the news that I had come in for sixty thousand roubles. I didn't contradict it. A little later Valerianov swore to me that business was going to the dogs and I made him a present of a hundred roubles.

At five o'clock that evening I was at the station. In my pocket, apart from my ticket to Moscow, I had only seventy roubles, but I felt like an emperor. When, after the second bell, I was getting into my compartment, Samoilenko, who, up to now, had kept his distance, came up to me.

"Forgive; I was hotheaded," he said theatrically.

I pressed his outstretched hand and answered amiably:
"Forgive, I too was hotheaded."

They gave me a farewell cheer. I exchanged the last kindly glance with Nelioubov, The train started and everything receded never to return. And when the last of the little blue huts of the outskirts began to disappear and the mournful, yellow, burnt-out steppe stretched itself endlessly—a strange sadness tugged at my heart, as if there, in that scene of my misfortunes, sufferings, hunger, and humiliations, had remained forever a particle of my soul.